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Living in the Gutter: Conflict and Contradiction in the Neoliberal Classroom

A Call to Action

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Note

Beyond a sewer or a ditch, the "gutter" is that narrow blank space between panels in every comic book or graphic novel. Seeming to say nothing at all, that thin white strip is where most of the magic actually happens. The gutter brings the art to life as sequential, and is the central site of tension and conflict, interpretation, imagination, and meaning making. We often feel, these days, that we are living inside a comic book, and so we write this from the margin, the cut, the gutter.

We are living in the midst of an historic sea change—a dramatic and irreversible cultural, economic, and political shift. The financial crisis and the cyclical economic adjustments of the day grab the headlines and draw most of the attention, but they are in some ways the least of it. Just beneath the surface, roiling and churning, a more profound upheaval is well under way: the decline of the U.S. empire and the eclipse of the "American Century," which in all likelihood (but not inevitably) will be as messy as the end of the British, French, Japanese, or Spanish empires; the end of financial capitalism and the shift from a concentrated industrial world to a globally industrial world, which may well be (again, not inevitably) as murderous as the great leap from agriculture to industry and from feudalism to capitalism; an unprecedented ecological dislocation that is already redrawing all existing maps and propelling millions of environmental refugees out of their homes and into a shrinking world.

The center cannot hold, and we are, each and all of us, whether we recognize it or not, in the mix and on the move, witnessing and participating in the end of an empire and the creation of new social and cultural connections. Nothing is inevitable, and the shape of the new world is impossible to predict. It could be a time of real peace, democracy, and equality; or it could be marked by permanent war, genocide, forced labor, and concentration camps. Where we go from here—chaos or community, barbarism or a revitalized democracy based on economic and global justice—depends on many variables, including how we understand and name this political moment, and how we act or fail to act within it.

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Time, action, vision—getting any of this more clearly in hand requires us to re-imagine, re-culture, and re-construct education from the ground up, for while education in the hands of the elite can be wielded as the guardian of the old and a bludgeon of control, education at its best is built on the twin pillars of enlightenment and liberation, and so it is also the midwife of the new. Where do we go from here? Our hope is to contribute now to this necessary conversation, for educators bear great responsibility for framing and participating in the era that is now unfolding.

Since World War II every U.S. president has repeatedly asserted the assumed role of the United States in global affairs with a simple slogan: "Leader of the Free World." When the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc collapsed in the 1980s, the U.S. conceit shifted slightly; it became in the eyes of its own elite the unrivaled leader of a unipolar world. It moved even more aggressively to dominate global resources, labor, and markets, with profits flowing exclusively toward the metropolis. Wealth poured in and businesses boomed. Economists of the wealthy countries advanced the notion that neoliberalism—a faith that the free market, especially a market that is not so free when dominated and controlled by the west—would solve all problems and make the west ever richer. The export of industrial production from the metropole to the Third World engendered Dickensian sweat shops around the world and drove down wages for workers in the imperial center, resulting in even greater spikes in profits. These realignments reduced metropolitan economies to service, information, and financial management, and were accompanied necessarily by a bloated military establishment built to keep these unjust relationships intact and relatively stable.

Today, however, the imperial dream of an unchallenged and grotesquely lopsided world is coming to a painful end. This is not the heralded "end of history," that weird ideology manufactured in the 1980s by the intellectual servants of power to explain and justify the imbalance and the injustice; rather, it is the end of the arrogant hope for a thousand-year *Pax Americana*.

The evidence of terminal rot at the center is everywhere, and the accompanying collapse is all around us: a scandalous financial emergency and an economic sink hole based on deep structural problems; rampant and disgraceful political corruption; the relentless search for profits turning the earth into a sewer and creating an environmental crisis that cannot and will not be ignored; demographic changes caused by globalization and immigration leading to the disappearance of European American majorities everywhere; the stalemate and impending defeat of Western military forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the entire region; and the various challenges to U.S. hegemony and triumphalism from all points of the compass including North and South Asia, Latin America, a tentatively united Europe, and oddly jerry-rigged entities such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China (BRIC) alliance. This is the gutter we have inherited.

This historic moment could surely be violent and horrifying, or it could be filled with new hope and possibilities. That is, in part, up to us, to how we think and what we do. In education, the notion of *21st century learners* should mean the promotion of creative and empowering pedagogies, not just narrow technology-based job training. This new reality challenges us to reconsider every assumption and to reexamine first and fundamental principles as we forge an educational project for today.

Schools at the End of Empire

Schools, of course, always serve the societies in which they are embedded in countless direct and indirect ways. The schoolhouse is a mini-society, both an open window and a shining mirror into any given social order. For example, for insight into the workings of apartheid in the old South Africa, you could simply have peeked into the schools. There you would have noticed White kids attending small classes with up-to-date equipment and well-trained teachers dispensing a curriculum complicit with White supremacist assumptions; you would have also seen Black kids in overcrowded, collapsing buildings being force-fed a steady diet of obedience and passivity.[3] Clearly the large majority of youngsters—the children of Ham ("hewers of wood and drawers of water") according to the official mythology often repeated by Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd—were destined for the mines and the mills, the fields and the prisons. Meanwhile, the other set, the White minority, were being tutored to administer and profit from that structural injustice.

On and on, across time and place, the principle holds that schools reflect their particular societies. For example, in any totalitarian society schools are built naturally for obedience and conformity. Whatever else is taught, obedience is front and center, the hidden or open curriculum on every agenda, conformity right in line. In a kingdom, schools teach fealty. In a racialized society, educational privileges and oppressions are distributed along the color line, and all lessons necessarily bend toward xenophobia and the naturalization of an imposed madness, illuminating everyone's place in the racial hierarchy. Education cannot be otherwise; schooling is never neutral. This helps explain why schools are always contested spaces, sites of conflict and contradiction, hope, and struggle. In the last half-century, social upheavals in South Africa, China, Europe, Chile, and the U.S. were sometimes centered, often energized, and always echoed within schools.

Our schools, here and now, show us exactly who we are beneath whatever fear or anxiety, lofty rhetoric, or self-congratulatory platitudes we might embrace. Look closely: One of the first things we notice is a strict social hierarchy with youngsters attending separate and unequal schools based on income and class background. Some American public schools are funded to the tune of $20,000 or more per student per year, while others scrape by on a piddling a fraction of that.[4] In one place, an over-crowded, hundred-year-old school building that looks like a medieval prison with a rotting roof and a busted furnace; down the road, a generously appointed campus containing well-maintained athletic fields and an Olympic-size pool, as well as a state-of-the-art physics lab in a building that looks like a palace for learning. Some kids kicked to the curb and left in the gutter, others lifted up, protected, and pushed forward. These savage inequalities (Kozol, 1992), a reality in New York and Illinois and California and all points between, are a defining characteristic of American schools, and not surprisingly, given our particular and peculiar history, they are manifest in a masterful system that is severely segregated

[3] Under the 1953 Bantu Education Act, the South African government enforced the segregation of schools, allowing Black students only separate, unequal education in limited fields geared toward specific forms of labor.

[4] See, for example, http://www.census.gov/govs/school

by ethnicity and race, which overlaps and interacts in powerful ways with class. Schools for poor and immigrant kids, or the descendants of formerly enslaved people, are literally walled off from schools available to the children of White people.

Another noteworthy commonplace—U.S. public schools are increasingly on a wartime footing, havens for military mobilization and calls to arms, home to training programs where kids learn to wear uniforms, shoot guns, and drill in lock step (Galaviz, Palafox, Meiners, & Quinn, 2011). Militarization extends into the culture of the school itself where police are becoming an assumed presence on high school campuses, and where acquiescence, uniformity, and compliance—the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime throughout history—are rewarded, while initiative, nonconformity, and free thinking are punished.

Our schools at their most contemptible teach social blindness, political indifference, emotional and intellectual dependency, provisional self-esteem, one's proper place in the hierarchy of winners and losers, and the continual need to submit to certified authority. What, after all, are the lessons of report cards, grades, and the endless batteries of tests that play the part of autopsies rather than diagnostics? Do not trust yourself; seek approval from your betters. And what is the point of the established schedule and the set fifty-minute periods, the uniform desks all in a row, the exhaustive use of time with no room to breathe and certainly no space to dream or wonder or wander or drift or reflect or imagine or just be bored? You are not important and unique; be malleable and productive in the rigorous terms established by a higher authority.

Schools tend to foreclose or shut down or wall off meaningful thought or authentic choice-making: They banish the unpopular, squirm in the presence of the unorthodox, and hide the unpleasant. There is no open space for skepticism, irreverence, or even doubt; we find ourselves too often locked in situations that reduce teaching to a kind of glorified clerking, passing along a curriculum of received wisdom and predigested (and often false) bits of information. The public space is eclipsed and imagination atrophies, and the right to think at all is called into question.

Attacks on Teachers and Communities

The dominant discourse in the U.S. today posits education as simply another commodity—a car, a box of bolts, a toilet; schools as little factories, cranking out products rather than education as a right and an endless journey. The metaphor of schools as businesses, teachers as workers, students as products and commodities leads rather simply to thinking that school closings and privatizing the public space are natural, that relentless standardized testing is sensible, and that zero tolerance is a reasonable proxy for justice; this is what the neoliberal elite classes have come to call "reform."

During the 2008 presidential campaign, when one candidate after another arose to denounce "lazy and incompetent teachers," promising to drive them out of the nation's classrooms, almost everyone nodded dully; after all, who will stand up and defend the incompetent or demand that our children deserve the lazy? The politician won the point by glibly framing the issue, setting the terms, digging the pit that would limit the imaginative options. If we had gotten to the podium first, we would have said, "Every student in a public school deserves an intellectually engaged, morally grounded, thoughtful, caring, and compassionate teacher who is both well compensated and well

rested," and we'd have gotten support too. Setting the frame is a powerful piece of work—who names the world and who frames the issue matters.

In the contested space of schools and education reform, particularly now, students and parents, educators and theorists, and the entire mobilized community should break the frames and all the controlling metaphors that have powerfully shaped our choices and set the terms and limits of our discussion about schools and reform. The pinched idea that education is a commodity rather than a right and a journey, the narrow notion that education is exclusively job-training for the young, the metaphor that imagines schools as little factories cranking out products—these are 19th century images for 21st century schools. The language of production dominates the discourse: assembly lines, management and supervision, quality control, productivity and outputs. Within this metaphor, students are the raw materials moving dumbly down the assembly line as value is added by the workers (teachers), or, if the metaphor shifts its angle slightly, students are the workers themselves—workers in training, of course.

In this metaphoric straightjacket, school learning is a lot like boots or hammers; however, unlike boots and hammers, the value of which is inherently satisfying and directly understood, the value of school learning is elusive and indirect. Its value, we are assured, has been calculated elsewhere by wise and accomplished people, and these masters know better than anyone what is best for the kids and for the world. The payoff is way down the line, but it is surely there, somewhere, over the rainbow. "Take this medicine," students are told repeatedly, day after tedious day; "it's good for you." Refuse the bitter pill, and go stand in the corner, where all the other losers are assembled.

A further twist in the metaphor is the world competition claim. The underpinnings of the No Child Left Behind campaign have been America's need to "be competitive," to outperform and hence dominate rising populations of China, India, and elsewhere. But why should we sign up for such an economic competition? Is the project of empire and domination one that we all want or is it a mad dream of a small ruling elite? Should we mourn the end of empire or try to help create a world where resources are equitably distributed? When were all American teachers, when were all students, drafted as soldiers in this war? If we favor a realignment of global relations, a relationship of ecological interdependence rather than dominance, then new curricular projects must follow.

Michelle Rhee, head of the Washington D.C. school system and the "poster child" of the new "reformers," warranted a cover story in *Time* in 2008 called "How to Fix America's Schools." The pivotal paragraph praised her for making more changes in a year-and-a-half on the job than other school leaders, "even reform-minded ones," make in five: closing 21 schools (15% of the total), and firing 100 central office personnel, 270 teachers, and 36 principals (Ripley, 2008). These are all policy moves that are supposed to stand for actual improvement. There was not one word on kids' learning or engagement with school—not even a nod at evidence that might connect these moves with student progress, nor mention of gathering greater resources for this starving system, or of more robust parent involvement; nothing on attracting and keeping teachers for the long haul or of critical out-of-school conditions (access to health care and housing, for example). Most telling of all: no vision of what kind of education is required for this moment and the new era.

The broad ideological approach uniting liberals and conservatives alike is embodied in a few tactical moves: the establishment of new schools (typically in poor communities of color with little political power), with selective admissions policies and access to more resources, as a prelude to neighboring schools becoming increasingly overcrowded and unmanageable and ripe for elimination; a chorus of praise for the assumed benefits of "choice" and "competition," and noisy accolades for "reformers" who are making "tough decisions" and "putting student progress before politics"; a blanket of blame for teachers and their unions for school failure, and a wall of silence concerning financial inequities, other resource disparities, or standardized tests as the sole measure of success; imposition of top-down models of teaching and standardization of curriculum with little transparency or participation from "below"; emphasis on rote learning, memorization of facts, and isolated efforts at skill building; behaviorist models of motivation; reliance on fill-in-the-bubble tests as a proxy for learning and intelligence; teacher-recruitment based on save-the-children, "Nice White Lady,"[5] and similar redemptive, missionary approaches.

The *Time* piece on Rhee rehearses most of these points. The Board of Education in Washington was recently dissolved so that "changes can be made without waiting for the blessing of a fractious body of overseers." Rhee is reportedly not interested in bickering over "small improvements such as class size and curriculum" or intractable problems she cannot control (poverty, hunger, violence). And, as in every piece promoting this approach to reform, there is the hidden dodge: Rhee taught briefly with Teach for America where, she claims, her kids' test scores skyrocketed, but her district did not have "good test data . . . so this assertion cannot be checked. But Rhee's principal at the time has confirmed the claim" (Ripley, 2008), on faith.

This so-called school reform movement is led by a merry band of billionaires with Bill Gates at its head. Gates, the de facto superintendent of U.S. schools due to of the size of his fortune and the scope of his intervention, as well as the widely lauded Bill Gates "brand" standing for all things successful, is the leader of the pack.[6] Less known co-conspirators include Eli Broad, Spencer Robertson, Michael Bloomberg, and the Waltons (of Wal-Mart), whose collective agenda—no surprise—is privatization, the death of the public square, the extraction of every penny of potential profit, and the corporatization of education. What is at stake is not only control over billions and billions of public tax dollars—local, state, and federal—but of much more urgency, the educational prospects of the next generation, and the shape of the world they will inherit and build.

We turn now to examine a few of the key players in this new right wing "reform" movement, drawn from an article by John Tarleton (2010) in *The Indypendent*:

Bill Gates

Using the Gates Foundation as his instrument, the Microsoft co-founder has channeled tens of millions of dollars into transforming large high schools through the

[5] "Nice White Lady" (parody of *Freedom Writers* and other teacher-themed Hollywood films), MADtv, Season 12, Episode 15, first broadcast February 24, 2007.

[6] Gates' education strategy can be found online here: http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Pages/united-states-education-strategy.aspx.

schools-within-a-school model. Critics say boutique public schools tend to enroll (or "cream") the best students while receiving more per-pupil funding than their large-school counterparts. Gates has also allocated large sums of money to help fuel the growth of charter schools. During the 2008 presidential election the Gates and Broad foundations teamed up to spend 24 million dollars to influence public education policy. Their shared message: expand charter schools and tie teacher pay to student performance on standardized tests. President Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has tapped top Gates Foundation officers to be his chief of staff and to head the agency's Office of Innovation and Improvement. Foundation officers are also spearheading the 4.35 billion dollar Race to the Top program, which promises aid to cash-strapped states that eliminate caps on charter schools and agree to place even greater emphasis on standardized testing. "It is not unfair to say that the Gates Foundation's agenda has become the country's agenda in education," says Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Eli Broad

A Los Angeles-based billionaire, who made his fortune in insurance and real estate, has been at the forefront of the school restructuring movement over the past decade. Using the foundation that bears his name, he has pushed aggressively for schools to be run more like businesses. The Broad (pronounced like "road") Foundation has seeded charter schools across the country, including in New York. It has also developed a number of programs to train school administrators, including the Broad Superintendent Academy, which instructs business, nonprofit, military, government, and education leaders in how to manage urban school districts. A number of top officials at the New York City's Department of Education have received Broad training. Speaking at the 92nd Street YMCA in New York City last year, Broad summarized his approach: "We don't know anything about how to teach or reading curriculum or any of that. But what we do know about is management and governance."

Spencer Robertson

The son of a hedge-fund billionaire who has donated 10 million dollars to Mayor Bloomberg's school projects since 2003, Spencer Robertson opened the Perseverance, Achievement, Vibrance, and Excellent (PAVE) Charter Academy in 2008 inside Public School (P.S.) 15, a successful elementary school in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Tensions further escalated when the Department of Education (DOE) recently announced that PAVE would be allowed to expand inside P.S. 15 over the next five years, even though Robertson has received 26 million dollars from the DOE to build his own school. Robertson's wife Sarah, the head of the board at Girls Prep Charter School, was at the center of a similar controversy when the school recently sought to expand inside public school facilities in the Lower East Side.

Michael Bloomberg

Bloomberg spent 75 million dollars to win the New York mayoralty in 2001. Since then, he has used his Midas-like wealth to dominate the city's political process while pursuing a top-down, data-driven vision of school reform. When New York won the 2007

Broad Prize for Urban Education, education historian Diane Ravitch described it as "a prize conferred by one billionaire on another."

The Waltons

The Walton Family Foundation of Wal-Mart is the single biggest investor in charter schools in the United States, giving a total of 150.3 million dollars during 2007-08. In New York, the Walton group has provided 15 million dollars in construction funding plus more than one million dollars per year for operating costs in recent years to help the Brighter Choice charter school network establish eight new schools in Albany, according to the Albany *Times Union*. Meanwhile, Governor David Paterson has received contributions totaling 55,900 dollars from Christy Walton, as he pushes legislation to lift New York's current statewide cap of 200 charter schools.

Arne Duncan

The Secretary of Education in the Obama administration is Arne Duncan, a Harvard-trained lawyer whose thinking and actions are perfectly in line with the new reformers. Duncan led the Chicago school system from 2001 to 2009, where he oversaw more than 60 school closings, primarily in poor neighborhoods of color, while rapidly opening privately run charter schools. He is smart and moderate, like his boss, and has a great outside jump shot, but he is also "firmly on the market forces side" and thoroughly in cahoots with the "billionaires club." Duncan is the neoliberal agenda with a human face, or as Diane Ravitch called him, "Margaret Spellings [Bush's reactionary Secretary of Education] in drag" (Rotella, 2010).

The Gates Foundation funneled 63.2 million dollars into the Chicago schools during Duncan's tenure and now Duncan is taking the "Chicago model" of "turnaround schools" nationwide with the help of top aides recruited from the Gates and Broad foundations. The unfortunately but accurately named "Race to the Top" is Duncan's signature initiative, something he himself has dubbed the Bush-era No Child Left Behind plan "re-branded."[7]

John Kline

John Kline, the ranking Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee said Duncan follows a "Republican agenda. . . . He's taken on the [unions] on performance pay . . . he's promoting charter schools. . . . He's treading ground that many would have not expected." The conservative business group, the Commercial Club of Chicago, while supporting Duncan whole-heartedly, noted in a recent report that the data on school improvement are faulty and do not support the claims of dramatic improvement from Duncan's strategy or efforts. And Diane Ravitch, the conservative scholar, has concluded that for all Duncan's positive press and charismatic presence, the results of the Duncan era are "no gains."

The truth is that the new reformers base their campaigns on ideology, not evidence: It is fact-free and faith-based at its root. Every article or report on the new reforms carries a

[7] See http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-assessment/index.html for more.

disclaimer, usually buried deep in the back pages: "It's too soon to tell if this wonderful intervention will close the gap," or "while there's no evidence, it appears to be working well." And so, while in the role of *critics* the reformers hammered the schools and the teachers for the test score results, in the role of *change-agents*, they conveniently shift the terms. An op-ed piece in the *New York Times* called "Why Charter Schools Fail the Test" (2010, p. A-31) by Charles Murray (generously described by the *Times* as a "scholar at the American Enterprise Institute," but best known as co-author of an infamous book, *The Bell Curve*, which proposed genetic inferiority of African Americans as the best explanation of the achievement gap) is typical: A credible study was released indicating that the oldest and most extensive voucher and charter school initiative in the country (the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program) showed no gains in student achievement. Murray embraced the study and argued that "standardized test scores are a terrible way to decide whether one school is better than another." But wait! Murray was promoting choice in large part as a way to improve test scores. No, he now says, "Schools control only a small part of what goes into test scores." Vouchers and charters are still a great idea, he says, because, "Schools differ in what they teach and how they teach it, and parents care deeply about both, regardless of whether test scores rise" (Murray, 2010). Same agenda, shifting argument.

The praise heaped on certain boutique charter efforts, such as the Harlem Children's Zone and the KIPP schools, has also brought an unfortunate spotlight on the evidence of their apparent miraculous success. And, indeed, the evidence seems to be more a matter of spin and public relations than actual change. The *New York Times*, which had previously praised these programs widely, began to have second thoughts.[8]

The Schools We Need

Schools for obedience and conformity—schools to fit the neoliberal agenda—are characterized by authoritarianism and irrelevance, passivity and fatalism. They turn on the little technologies for control and normalization in classrooms—the elaborate schemes for managing the crowd, the knotted system of rules and discipline, the exhaustive machinery of schedules and clocks, the laborious programs of testing and grading, assessment, judgment, and evaluation, all of it adding up to a familiar cave, an intricately constructed hierarchy—everyone in a designated place and a place for everyone. Knowing and accepting one's pigeonhole on the vast and barren mountainside becomes the core of teaching and the only lesson one needs.

This kind of education will never contribute to the world we need and want: sustainable, in balance, at peace, powered by cooperation, recognition, and justice. If the elites are imagining the end of public education, what are we to do? Certainly not simply wring our hands and hold our breath while we wait to see if they will change their minds. Hope is at the base, in the communities, and throughout our schools. This is where the work must be done today.

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[8] See for instance Otterman, S. (2010, October 12). Lauded Harlem schools have their own problems. *New York Times:* http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/13/education/13harlem.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=harlem%20children%27s%20zone&st=cse

A free and fair society built for a humane future is geared toward and inspired by the radical notion that the fullest development of all human beings is the necessary condition for the full and free development of each person and, conversely, that the fullest development of each is necessary for the full and free development of all. This core value and first principle has huge implications, of course, for educational policy: racial segregation is wrong, class separation unjust, disparate funding immoral. But it has a powerful meaning for curriculum and teaching as well, for what is taught and how. It points in the first place to the importance of opposing the hidden curriculum of obedience and conformity in favor of initiative, questioning, doubt, skepticism, courage, imagination, and creativity—these become central and not peripheral to the school experience. These are qualities to model and nourish, encourage and defend in classrooms built for the 21st century.

Educators then focus their efforts not on the production of things, but on the development of fully realized human beings who are capable of controlling and transforming their own lives, citizens who can participate actively in public life, people who can think and act ethically in a complex and ever-changing world. This kind of teaching encourages students to develop initiative and imagination, the capacity to name the world, the wisdom to identify the obstacles to their full humanity and to the humanity of others, and the courage to act upon whatever the known demands. Education, then, is transformed from rote boredom and endlessly alienating routines into something that is eye-popping and mind-blowing—always about opening doors and opening minds as students forge their own pathways into a wider world.

In a just and free society, teachers want students, collectively and individually, to be able to think for themselves, to make judgments based on evidence and argument, and to develop minds of their own. We need to be aware of the stakes and aware as well that there is no simple technique or linear path that will take our classrooms where they need to go and then allow us to live out our teaching lives untroubled, settled, and finished. There is no promised land in teaching, just an aching and persistent tension between reality and possibility.

Students ask the essential questions that are—like the young themselves—always in motion, dynamic, and never twice the same. They want to uncover and discover who they are in the world, and they want to figure out what they can make of what they have been made. We, adults and teachers and family members and peers, can help them find their own freedom and possibilities, but only if we are people actively in search of our own freedom and possibilities, asking our own fundamental questions: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be an educated person? What does it mean to construct a meaningful, purposeful, and valuable life in the world, here and now? What kind of education do we want and need? Whose questions are encouraged, whose inquiries pursued? What demands does freedom make? In many ways these kinds of questions are themselves the answers, for they lead us into a powerful sense that we can and will make a difference; keeping these questions vital, alive, and fresh is a huge teaching challenge as we search for ways to live within and beyond the contingent and partial answers, as well as the setbacks discovered and encountered along the way.

Just imagine how much safer and livelier and more peaceful our neighborhoods and communities would become if we reorganized education in a fundamental way. Instead

of trying to keep children isolated in classrooms, envision engaging them in problem-posing, question-asking, and community-building activities with the same audacity and vision with which the Black Freedom Movement engaged them in desegregation work 45 years ago: planting community gardens, recycling waste, creating alternative transportation and work sites, naming and protesting injustices around them, organizing neighborhood arts and health festivals, rehabbing houses, painting public murals. By giving children and young people a reason to learn beyond the individualistic goal of getting a job and making more money, by encouraging them to exercise their minds and their hearts and their soul power, we would tap into the deep well of human values that gives life a richer shape and meaning.

Instead of trying to bully young people to remain in classrooms isolated from the community and structured only to prepare them for a distant and quickly disappearing and hostile job market, we might recognize that the reason so many young people drop out of school is because they are voting with their feet against an educational system which sorts, tracks, tests, and rejects or certifies them like products in a factory. They are crying out for an experience that values them as human beings.

Education is always an arena of struggle as well as hope: struggle because it stirs in us the need to look at the world anew, to question what we have created, and to wonder what is worthwhile for human beings to know and experience; and hope because we gesture toward the future, toward the impending, toward the coming of the new. Education is where we ask how we might engage, enlarge, and change our lives, and it is, then, where we confront our dreams and fight our notions of the good life, where we try to comprehend, apprehend, or possibly even change the world. Education is contested space, a natural site of conflict—sometimes restrained, other times in full eruption—over the shape of the future.

Hope is a choice; confidence is a choice and a politic. We choose to get up every day and open our eyes, pay as much attention as we can bear, be astonished at the beauty and the horror of it all, and then to act, to doubt, and to act again. Hope in no way minimizes the horror, but it holds out the possibility of change. Another world is possible, and we are living in a swirling uncertain history in the making. We can and must develop the ability (in ourselves no less than in our students) to see life as infused with a capacity to cherish happiness, to respect evidence and argument and reason, to uphold integrity, and to hope and work for a world more loving, peaceful, and fair than the one we inherited. Hope is the capacity to notice or invent alternatives and possibilities for action. Of course we live in dark times, and some of us inhabit even darker places, and of course we act mostly in the dark. But we are free as teachers and thinkers mostly when we refuse to see the situation or the world before us as the end of the matter; we are free when we work to change the society, to rewrite the narrative, to resist, and to invent.

We reach toward freedom.

A Curriculum of Liberation

Education, like love, is generative: The more you have, the better off you become; the more you give away, the more you have. Open hearts, open doors, open minds—giving knowledge and learning and education away diminishes nothing.

We turn to the themes of liberation pedagogy linked to broad social movements. Students become the subjects and the actors in constructing their own educations, not simply the objects of a regime of discipline and punishment. Education becomes uncoupled from the inadequate and illegitimate *meritocracy model,* and the public good becomes understood more fundamentally. Instead of schooling-as-credentialing, sorting, gate keeping, and controlling, education allows *all* students to become smarter, more capable of negotiating our shared and complex world, and more able to work effectively in a community and across communities to innovate and initiate with courage and creativity. We all begin to re-examine core personal and ethical values in order to make more thoughtful, caring, and productive life choices. This requires courage—from teachers and students, from families and communities—to build alternative and insurgent learning spaces focused on what we know we need, rather than what we are told we must endure.

There is no single, instant, perfect, or orthodox solution: schools within schools, a general walk-out and strike, charter schools, community schools, takeover of current districts—each can be a site of invention and struggle just as each can turn into its opposite and become a disappointment. The answers will be found in what kind of educational projects we are able to generate, what kind of resistance we undertake, and what kind of alternatives we perceive or uncover or imagine or create.

If educators are to be rescued from utter irrelevance, we must meet young people where their literacy, their meaning making, and their imaginations are unleashed. Teachers can then relinquish their roles as arbiters of value and transform themselves into allies, enabling projects to reach ever further into the community. Math, science, language, sports, literature, music, art, and history can all be explored in cross-curricular projects extending between classes and between alternate learning sites.

If schools are to become vibrant centers of intellectual and social growth, we must all become bolder, more confident, and more creative in re-imagining and reinventing; we must catch up with the cultural discourse that has had to locate itself outside, in the streets, the independent programs, and the new digital media spaces. It is time to invent curriculum and teaching that seeks to empower rather than to crush the young. It is time to build an education no one has to recover from. Audacity! Audacity! Audacity!

In 1963, Charlie Cobb[9] wrote a brief proposal for Freedom Schools in the community organizing work in Mississippi. He explained that, while the Black children in the South were denied many things—decent school facilities, honest and forward-looking curriculum, fully qualified teachers—the fundamental injury was "a complete absence of academic freedom, and students are forced to live in an environment that is geared to squashing intellectual curiosity, and different thinking" (¶1). He named the classrooms of Mississippi as "intellectual wastelands," and he challenged himself and others "to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippi, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands, and questions" (¶2). Their own desires, their own demands, their own questions—for African-Americans living in semi-feudal

[9] Cobb, C. (1963). "Proposal for a Summer Freedom School Program in Mississippi." Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in *Education and Democracy*
http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/B_05_ProspForFSchools.htm

bondage, managed and contained through a system of law and custom as well as outright terror—this was beyond imagination.

The aim of the Freedom School curriculum was to challenge the students' curiosity about the world, introduce them to particularly "Negro" cultural background, and teach basic literacy skills in one integrated program. That is, the students would study problems arising in their own world, such as the administration of justice or the relation between state and federal authority. Each problem area would be built around a specific episode that was close to the experience of the students. Student experiences and student insights were a driving force in the matters students and teachers inquired into and the projects they undertook. Education became a matter of community organizing and community empowerment.

Our program for this moment must be to build today's Freedom Schools and Freedom School thinking in every classroom, school, community, or public space within reach. We look to the Freedom School tradition for inspiration and attitude, sustenance and stance, and as an orientation toward launch, in the hope of making a contribution to building a new movement and a transformed education toward the creation of a new society.

Wherever we are now, and wherever we start, Freedom School experiences always begin with an engagement with fundamental questions that can shape our work: Who in the world am I? How did I get here and where am I going? What in the world are my choices and my chances? What is my special story, and how is it like or unlike the stories of others? What is my responsibility to those others? What is my work today, and why?

Here is a small sampling of possible steps, campaigns, and initiatives for our political moment, right here, right now. There are more of course, but if each one can reach one and each one can teach one, if each of us dives into the wreckage and swims through the gutter toward the light, who knows what we might unleash:

(a) Our city/our education. Imagine the creation of vast, messy, democratic community assemblies in every town and hamlet and neighborhood, organized explicitly to draw on the wisdom of everyone to rethink and renew curriculum and teaching, and the meaning and location of school . . .

(b) The "Septima Clark Teacher Corps." Imagine a massive initiative to bring parents and unemployed folks into the schools as aides and teacher candidates, and to bring school people into communities as peers and colleagues . . .

(c) Peer restorative justice. Imagine building in every school and every community a movement to end the criminalization of youth and to open creative spaces for moral reflection and positive action, redemption and recovery, whenever someone has made a mistake or wronged the community . . .

(d) Education without profit. Imagine a giant upheaval to put an end to privatizing the public space . . .

(e) Art and community. Bring the poetry, music, art from the communities into the classrooms; validate and encourage community vernaculars, expressions, and creativity; publish student work in digital media, slam books, wall posters, and everywhere else in order to reach a wider audience . . .

(f) Re-thought and re-designed assessment. Imagine groups of parents, teachers, and students fighting to end valorizing test scores as a proxy for either intelligence,

worth, or achievement, and moving away from high-stakes, sort-and-punish approaches, toward authentic assessment . . .

(g) Youth journalism. Revive journalism through student investigative reports, oral history explorations, and presentations, which have the advantage of youth point of view and insight . . .

(h) Open spaces. Leave the confines of the school buildings for field trips, retreats, camping, community garden work, green shoreline projects, artistic explorations, border visits, social action projects, nature hiking, etc. . . .

(i) Demilitarization of our schools. Imagine drawing a bright line between military training and recruitment, and education as a human right . . .

(j) "No Excuses." Imagine a community focus on reclaiming "accountability" and "standards" as they apply to every institution and entity, not teachers alone or students in isolation – after all, high asthma rates, health disparities, poverty, access to guns, militarization, consumerism as an ideology (and more) cannot sensibly be laid at the feet of teachers; they are the responsibility of all, especially the wealthy and the powerful . . .

Each of these possible campaigns and initiatives (and again, there are more) has the potential to unleash enormous popular power to re-imagine, re-frame, and rebuild education from the bottom up. Whatever we initiate, whatever we take up and organize around, let us remember to reframe the debates, connect the dots, recognize the links, and unite the issues.

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